Rintu and his Compass

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Illustrations
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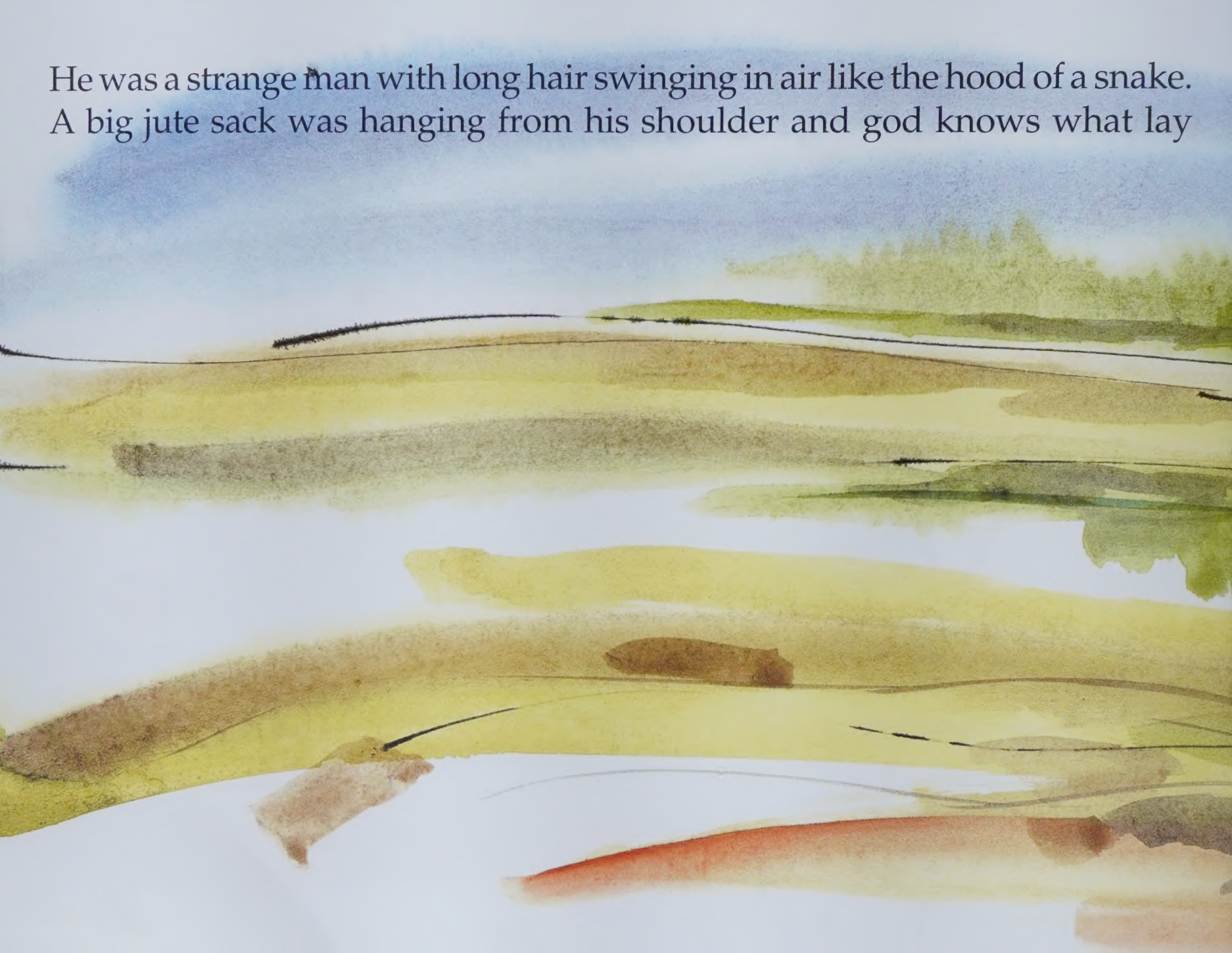
He was a strange man with long hair swinging in air like the hood of a snake. A big jute sack was hanging from his shoulder and god knows what lay



inside. He was holding a bamboo stick with an iron needle at the tip. He was sitting by the side of the creek where yellow sand was glimmering under

knee-deep water. Sitting on sand he was concentrating on something with his face downwards. Rintu carefully watched him from a distance. Rintu had come to Bakkhali in Sunderbans with his parents on a holiday tour. On his last birthday, father had presented Rintu a wonderful needle compass with a brass lid. It looked like a pocket watch. The red tip of the needle always pointed to the north. Father informed that expeditionaries use it to find directions in the vast sea, desert or deep forest. Rintu would also one day set on a voyage to discover a new country like Columbus. So he carried the magic compass always with himself. It was the dearest thing of his life.

The sea was roaring at a distance. Avoiding the careful eyes of his father, Rintu slipped out of his blue wooden hutment and started running under the Casuarina trees. He wanted to have a look at the wonderful sea where he would sail one day to travel to the unknown countries.

After running for some time he reached a meandering creek where he came across that same wandering man. Both were face to face when suddenly the man commanded in a husky voice, "Stay there, don't move even a single step further."

Rintu felt very bad. 'Who is he to command me like this? What is the harm if I step further! A bad man no doubt, otherwise why would he sit like a preying cat on the sand? What shall I do now? Should I move? No, that will not be wise. A would-be adventurer should act more wisely,' thought Rintu.

So he stood still and observed the man silently and asked in a low voice, "What is your name?"

"Bheem Hati," assured the man.

Rintu was about to burst into laughter. The man was so lean and lanky that he almost looked like a scarecrow. How could his name be Bheem Hati which meant 'giant elephant'?

Rintu now asked gravely, "What do you do?"

The man assured, "I catch fish, crab and turtle."

Rintu wondered, 'Is that a profession? How can the turtle be caught with a stick!'

Suddenly the man started tapping the sand here and there with the end of the stick. As soon as there was a hard sound, the man scooped out the sand with his ten fingers just like a cat. Before Rintu realised what the man was up to, he saw a giant turtle struggling hard to slip out of his hand. The man kept pressing it hard on the sand. Then he overturned the turtle. Lying on the back, the helpless creature started throwing its four legs in air.

Rintu could never have thought that a real living turtle could come out of that dry lifeless sand! Suddenly Rintu felt a deep admiration for the man who could do such a miracle. The man put the turtle in his sack.

Rintu asked doubtfully, "Do turtles grow in sand?"

The man replied, "As mangoes come out of flowers, turtles from eggs! The female turtles leave the ocean and travel to shore to find a suitable sandy bank to lay eggs."

After saying this the man stretched his body and muttered, "I should now go to Kumiraganda creek where they are aplenty. Tomorrow I will go to the distant sea to catch Hilsa, a fish."

An amazed Rintu asked, "How will you go to sea?"

The man pointed at a small boat half sunk in the sand and said, "Look, we go for fishing by that boat. Once we sailed to fish, to Haribhanga Char, a small deserted island in the Bay of Bengal. None lives there except for big rats and snakes. The colour of sea there is sapphire blue.

It was a bright day but suddenly the sky darkened with dense clouds and it began to rain cats and dogs followed by a cyclone. A swinging column of water rose high in the sky. It collapsed near our boat with a thunderous sound. Fishermen of Sunderbans call it 'elephant's trunk' because it looks like that. Had it collapsed on our boat we would have been crushed.

All around us there were waves as big as mountains. After two days of struggle, the storm finally subsided and the sea became calm once again. We were lost. There was no trace of land. We went on drifting to the tune of the current and lost our whereabouts. There was no food nor any drinking water. On the sixth day, one of our crew lost his senses in utter fear and despair. We all gave up hope of life."

The man continued in a deep voice. "However, on the eighth day we saw land at a distant horizon. We sailed there with great difficulty and somehow escaped death. It was an awful experience for me. I could not sleep peacefully for many days. Even in dreams I saw big waves roaring and rushing at me and I would cry out of fear. The remaining night I passed sitting on my bed." The man stopped. A grasshopper was hopping over the grass. Violet flowers of creepers covering the sand dunes like green carpets.

After some time Rintu asked, "If there is so much danger in going to distant sea, why do you go there at all to catch fish?"

The man assured with a smile claiming, "It is fun my boy. To not go to catch fish is still more dangerous." He pensively looked at the blue sky where a sea gull was circling.

Rintu suddenly felt a deep sympathy for the man. So intense was the feeling that he had to struggle hard to check his tears. He longed to do something very useful for this humble man. But what? Suddenly he got an idea. He took out the compass from his pocket and told the man, "Take it. This is meant for you."

"What is it—watch? What shall I do with a watch?" the man was obviously at a loss.

"No, no. It is not a watch. It is a compass. Do you not know anything about it?"

Rintu was surprised to learn that a man of his father's age had never seen a simple thing like a compass!

"What it is for, my boy?"

"It will help you find direction in the vast sea. When you are lost and there is no trace of land."

Very suspiciously that old man took the compass from Rintu's hand and watched like a curious child.

Rintu told him affectionately. "Now you can go to the distant sea along with the compass. You will find direction even if you are caught in the storm!"

The man suddenly tried to return the compass by thrusting it into Rintu's hand.

"Take it, we are savage country folk. It will come of no use to us."

"No," Rintu said firmly, "it is yours only. It is yours."

Rintu turned back and started running fast, so that the man could not catch hold of him to return the compass. Every now and then he looked back to see a funny sight. A strange man standing with a long bamboo stick placed on his shoulder with eyes glued to the compass.

Rintu had just gifted one of the most precious possessions of his life to a completely unknown man but he felt no pain. Rather he felt proud. Nobody knew he had just explored a new country no less wonderful than the country explored by Columbus!

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